

Romaine Quinn

State Representative • Serving the 75th Assembly District

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11/01/2017

Contact: Rep. Quinn (888) 534-0075

Mining: Why I Voted Yes

Madison – When I was first elected to the Assembly in 2014, I was contacted by a woman who had serious concerns about the former Flambeau Mine in Ladysmith, WI. Having been only six years old when it finished operating, I didn't even know that there was a former mine in Ladysmith. The woman was a plaintiff in a previous lawsuit against the Flambeau Mining Company (which she had lost), and claimed that the old mine site was polluting the environment. Thus began my journey in further understanding Wisconsin's history and the controversy that surrounds sulfide mining.

For those of you like me that haven't always understood what this type of mining is, sulfide mining is the extraction of minerals such as gold, silver, copper, zinc, and lead. These minerals are usually not found in their pure form and in most cases are bonded to sulfur, forming a sulfide compound. Thus, when someone mines for these minerals, the compounds have to be broken, which in turn releases various forms of sulfur, which is an inevitable by-product of this activity. In other words, the very nature of this mining activity creates a sulfuric pollutant.

Wisconsin currently has a moratorium that says a company cannot even apply to open a sulfide mine unless they can point to another sulfide mine that has operated for ten years and has been reclaimed for 10 years without polluting the environment. But this is the wrong question to ask: as I mentioned above, it is not possible to *not* have pollutants at a sulfuric mining site, as that is the byproduct of the activity. The real question should be whether or not the pollutants can be safely kept on site. If you look to the Flambeau Mine in Ladysmith, the answer is yes.

We're also asking the wrong question when the mining moratorium language requires a comparable mine. During the committee hearing, our own DNR testified that these kinds of comparisons do not matter because each mine site is going to be unique, including the way the potential site is mined and reclaimed. How can you compare a gold mine in the desert of Arizona to a copper mine in the forests of Montana?

The Flambeau Mine in Ladysmith operated for just over four years and generated a total of 181,000 tons of copper, 334,000 ounces of gold, and 3.3 million ounces of silver. The mine site today has 48 different wells that monitor the ground water, plus additional testing that is done on the Flambeau River, which is only a few hundred feet away from the site. To this day, 20 years after operation, the Flambeau River *has not* been polluted. The only pollution that has occurred because of mining activity has been contained within the mine site itself, which is to be expected. There is a small intermittent (rarely flowing) stream further away from the mining site that showed higher levels of copper and zinc which opponents will point to, but there is no way determine if this was due to mining activity or to naturally occurring levels of these minerals which are already prevalent in the area.

The most important part of the legislation is that it does not exempt any current environmental regulations, nor does it pre-empt local communities from enacting their own regulations and agreements. The process to even get a permit to mine is quite complex, taking anywhere from three to five years, and allowing public input on numerous occasions. The City of Ladysmith, Town of Grant, and Rusk County were able to negotiate a deal that protected private wells, allowed for property value guarantees, and limited blasting and truck hauling. In fact, they even negotiated guaranteed tax payments, so when the mine closed early in its 4th year of operation, they still paid that full year of taxes. Because of the mine, the City of Ladysmith was able leverage \$29 million worth of investment into the area, which created more opportunity for families.

People can argue the economic benefits of mining, but the fact remains that we all use these materials in our everyday lives. We don't just expect them to be readily available for consumption, we *demand* them. Our wedding rings, the cars we drive, the iPhone in our pocket, and the wind turbines that help power our homes *all* require the minerals obtained through sulfide mining. Some will argue that sulfide mining is ok, as long as it isn't in Wisconsin. I completely understand the "not in my backyard" sentiment, but out of concern for the environment, wouldn't you want this mining to take place in an area that is heavily regulated, monitored, and in places where elected leaders actually care about the environment?

Most importantly, I want to thank everyone that reached out to me. From sitting down with groups on both sides of the issue and listening to over seven hours of public testimony, I have learned so much about this topic. Based on what I've learned, I voted for six additional amendments to the bill to ensure further financial and environmental safeguards. These amendments were drafted with the help of a former DNR secretary who was in command of the DNR during the time of the Flambeau Mine. Unfortunately this issue is fairly complex and cannot be explained in one simple press release. That is why I want to encourage anyone with questions to please reach out to my office. I'm just one phone call or coffee visit away.

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